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ABSTRACT

The hallmark of the reading/writing workshop approach is its flexibility--its accommodation to the unique creativity of every student and of every teacher across a landscape of unique and distinct classroom communities. From the collective works of leading proponents, the following principles for workshop teachers can be liberally abstracted: the reading/writing workshop teacher is a facilitator, mediator, and mentor; the teacher reads, writes, and learns with the students; reading and writing are not separate subdisciplines; and reading/writing workshop students are trusted to construct and direct their own learning. The traditional approach to instruction can be reduced to a brief analysis of four "C's": a canon of privileged works of literature; a curriculum which is clearly defined and carefully structured; classification of students according to whether they achieved the skills; and teacher as conductor of an orchestra, overseeing the transmission of knowledge to students. Generalized features of the workshop approach can be loosely classified under four more "C's": choice, allowing students to choose what to read and how to interpret it; collaboration, the sharing of responses, ideas, drafts, and finished written products; cultural diversity, encouraging students to bring to the classroom context their knowledge of different social and cultural communities; and charter, a coalition of readers and writers, teachers and learners, that binds the members toward a common goal. What often emerges as teachers implement a reading/writing workshop is a blend of the two versions of the four C's. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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The Four Cs, Tradition, and the Workshop Approach

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by Liz C. Stephens

Talk of the reading/writing workshop approach has buzzed in teachers' lounges, school board meetings, and professional journals since the 1980's. Testimonials of teachers who have attempted to implement the reading/writing workshop have consequently proliferated, as have formal inservice workshops on "the workshop". Yet for many the question remains: What exactly is the reading/writing workshop and how is it applied?

Atwell's book *In the Middle: Writing, Reading and Learning with Adolescents* (1987) is perhaps the best known testimonial-like case study, and the "Atwell-method" now means reading-writing workshop the way "Kleenex" often means tissue. Atwell is not the first, however (see Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; and Murray, 1982), nor is her book the only teacher's story-turned-guide (see Romano, 1987 and Rief, 1992). But it is considered "the" guide, and by definition, a guide suggests, not dictates, direction. As workshop advocate and author Linda Rief (1992) notes,

> ...I am not Nancie Atwell or Tom Romano, and I can never do exactly what they do in the same way they do it. We all carry our own personalities, histories, and agendas into a room the minute we step in. I adapted and changed their ideas, their structures, their strategies to fit me and my kids. What I do today, I may not do tomorrow. One thing will remain constant. I will always have questions. (p. 4)

There is a common ground, however. From the collective works of leading proponents, the following principles for workshop teachers can be liberally abstracted:

* The reading/writing workshop teacher is not the expert or source of the "correct" knowledge, but rather is a facilitator, mediator, and mentor for each student.
* The reading/writing workshop teacher reads, writes, and learns with the students.
* Reading and writing are not considered separate subdisciplines of language arts.
* Reading/writing workshop students can be trusted to construct and direct their own learning.

Although these generalizations help to weave the various proponents' visions into a single fabric, they are too broad to convey the meaning of workshop as it is practiced in a classroom. One way to conceptualize the practices attached to the label "reading/writing

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workshop" is to situate them with and against traditional practice.

Traditional Four Cs

How "workshop" is distinguished from "non-workshop" begins with an outline of those features of what today is considered the traditional approach, the approach which has dominated schooling for the last three decades. The extensive whole of the traditional approach can perhaps be reduced to a brief analysis of four "Cs": canon, curriculum, classification, and conductor.

Canon. Particular works of literature are considered privileged because they embody mainstream knowledge. These are the champions of a "cultural literacy" (Hirsch, 1988). Teachers are acutely familiar with the canon – the collection of works that typically reflect a Euro-centric cultural perspective. Lists from local, state, and now, possibly a national curriculum, inform teachers of the literary works that need to be "covered."

Curriculum. Clearly defined and carefully structured, the curriculum goals and objectives echo models for industrial efficiency popularized by Frederick W. Taylor in the early 1900's. Efficiency is complemented with essentialism. The essential curriculum as proposed by the members of the Paideia Group (Adler, 1982) stresses *sameness* in the name of democracy: the same objectives for all, the same course of study for all. Their argument is based on the premise that "sameness as human beings – as members of the same species – means that every child has all the distinguishing properties common to all members of the species." There are two basic curricular goals: that students acquire a common body of organized knowledge and that they develop a common set of intellectual skills.

Classification. To determine if the specific objectives of the curriculum goals have been met, students are tested. Standardized assessment instruments are constructed according to the "sameness" of students but are used to tease out the differences in ability and to measure whether students "achieved" the skills of reading and writing as prescribed by the curriculum.

Conductor. Like the conductor of an orchestra who knows what each musician should be playing and who directs the performance according to its precise script, the teacher's responsibility in a traditional environment is to know the content and to oversee its transmission according to the curriculum. The teacher is the expert, didactically imparting conventional knowledge about literary history and literary criticism, modeling isolated skills, then supervising and evaluating the students' acquisition of those skills.

Nontraditional Four Cs

Perhaps the most immediately obvious feature that identifies the workshop as nontraditional is its physical appearance. Unlike the arrangement of a traditional classroom – rows of desks, a centrally located teacher's desk, and some bookshelves, the workshop may be divided into several areas with tables for writing, a table for conferencing, rugs and bean-bags for laying on the floor to read, a publishing area with computers and book binding equipment (Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992). Hundreds of books, a variety of reference materials, and writing supplies (paper, pens, pencils) are available for student use, and student work is displayed throughout. Most importantly, the teacher rarely takes center stage; instead the teacher moves from student to student assisting with writing, reading, and publishing – all within the same class period.

As with the traditional approach, the generalized features of workshop approach will be loosely classified under four "Cs": choice, collaboration, cultural diversity, and chatter.

Choice. Choice is the one characterizing ingredient that most clearly distinguishes the reading/writing workshop from the more traditional approach. Students in a workshop are allowed to choose what to read, how to interpret it, what to write, what form the writing should take, and how to present literary productions to communities ranging from the classroom to the nation (Atwell 1987; Rief, 1992).

Allowing student choice does not mean there are no boundaries or guidelines, however. The workshop is highly organized, and the workshop teacher does not stand back and watch as students simply guide themselves. Atwell describes how she helps students set goals for themselves, how they prepare logs of their reading, how she keeps a detailed record of their daily advancements towards their goals and how she applies "nudging" to motivate individual students towards novels that "give shape to kids' feelings" or books that "address the world of ideas." Her minilessons (5-10 minute-long whole class lessons on various skills and procedures) are carefully planned and structured according the immediate student needs so that they provide a "communal frame of reference" through which she shares her knowledge about reading and writing.

Clearly individual choice and guidance are paramount, however, the teacher does not eliminate whole class readings of particular literary works nor does she necessarily relinquish a "reading list." Rief (1992) reflects on her sense of responsibility to teach more than the process of interpreting and producing quality literature, to examine social ethics and mores through literature.

> *"Most importantly, the teacher rarely takes center stage . . ."*

However, she also allows herself to choose the literary work that will convey the principles she wants to relate.

> Sometimes I choose a book based on a theme I'd like to explore: generations, human rights, the environment, prejudice, and so on. Sometimes I choose the theme based on what's happening in the students' lives or in the world around them. Sometimes the choice is based on the experiences they bring to the classroom. Always, the choice is based on the fact I like the book. If I'm not passionate about the book and what it says, I will not pass on that love of learning from reading. (p. 105)

According to workshop advocates, the workshop teacher specifies distinct goals and objectives, but they are always informed by student choices. In the last six weeks of the year, Rief (1992) requests that her students present a reader's-writer's project that "proves" their "expertise." The students must present their findings in three different genres (letter, poem, essay, video, mime, etc.) and research a topic three different ways (writing, interviews, film study, etc.). Although her expectations are circumscriptive, the students remain free to choose any topic, to choose the method of their research, and to choose the form of presentation.

Finally, among the most distinctive features of the workshop regarding choice is that of abandonment (Atwell, 1987). Students are free to abandon a book if it does not appeal to them or to abandon a piece of

writing if it does not suit their needs.

Collaboration. Collaboration in the workshop entails the sharing of responses, ideas, drafts, and finished written products through conferences with the teacher, conferences with peers, journal exchanges with each other, with the teacher and with other adult members of the community such as parents and siblings. Collaborating to make meaning, rather than surmising or reiterating teacher-held interpretations, is the function of small-group discussion and whole-class discussion. The role of the teacher is also that of a learner who in collaboration with students, constructs meaning through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Perhaps this role of the teacher as a collaborator and facilitator is most clearly manifested in the exchange that occurs during a conference. Conferences are typically designed to help students make and achieve their personal goals. Students make appointments with the teacher to discuss their writing. Atwell says the teacher in a conference sits quietly, waits, listens, and gives "time and ownership" so that students can be helped to know "what it is they want to use time to do."

Cultural diversity. A consciousness of diversity is becoming a major focus in education, and language plays a key role in how knowledge is defined and treated in the schools. For teachers of language in all its applications, there are critical implications. Purves (1993) argues that because literature is the "expression of and lens into" cultures, literature is "valorized." A cultural view of literature is "what will sustain it in the schools, more so than the moral view, or the universalistic view, or the aesthetic view...a view that sees literary works in their historical and cultural context rather than as disembodied texts, is the only moral basis upon which we can build a Literature program" (p. 358).

Although the issue of multiculturalism is not addressed per se in the seminal writing of reading/writing workshop proponents, the space for a cultural view of reading, writing, and speaking is there. Students in a reading/writing workshop are encouraged to bring to the context of their activity the knowledge that they have accumulated as inhabitants of different social and cultural communities through workshop activities such as peer conferences, small group discussion, dialogue journals, response journals, and projects that encourage them to investigate people and places in the community and to communicate orally, all players gain knowledge.

Charter. Unlike the need for "sameness" in a democracy, which is the premise for the cultural literacy agenda (Hirsch, 1988) and the essentialist curriculum (Adler, 1982), the difference among students is what drives the workshop curriculum. What directs a classroom is a coalition of readers and writers, teachers and learners, all manifesting and responding to their similarities and differences. And what is considered the curriculum is more like a charter that binds the teacher and each of the students as members working towards a common goal. Because each group of charter members is different year to year, class to class, the charter is continually redrafted. Rief (1992) expresses this in the following:

> *My students are my curriculum.* [italics added] I want to nurture that uniqueness not standardize my class room so that the students become more and more alike, their only aim to pass minimum competency tests (p. 8).

Test scores and grades, nevertheless, have been and continue to be considered the indicators of how successfully students have acquired the "appropriate" skills and knowledge outlined in the goals of the curriculum. Because the subjective workshop approach does not correspond well with the objective standardization of the traditional curriculum design, accountability presents a dilemma for teachers who are inevitably faced with the question of how to "grade" readers and writers. Unquestionably, the student portfolio is the preferred method of assessment of all workshop advocates because it circumvents what Beach and Marshall (1991) regard as the "artificiality of an assessment" (p. 225).

"If there was simply one recipe for applying the reading/writing workshop approach . ."

Although all of the advocates of the workshop have devised grading systems, grades are not the major motivation for performance in the workshop; publishing for the class and for broader, even commercial, audiences is a much more motivating force than grades. Atwell (1987) stresses that "a sense of audience—the knowledge that someone will read what they have written—is crucial to young writers," and that publishing offers them an opportunity to discover the purposefulness of writing in life outside of the classroom.

What Is Reading/Writing Workshop?

When the four Cs of the traditional essentialist, efficient approach and the four Cs of the nontraditional "workshop" approach are juxtaposed, it becomes clear that teachers who are trying to bring the fruits of educational research and innovation to their practice and comply with the goals of the educational system find themselves in a state of flux. For those teachers who have attempted to apply the method in their classrooms, the workshop approach does not have the same meaning because what often emerges is some blend of the two versions of the four Cs. Atwell (1991) says the variations of her methods evidenced in the letters she has received from teachers reinforces her conviction that no method is teacher-proof. For example, one teacher reserves blocks of time for writing workshops in order to give the students the experience of real writers while at the same time covering a syllabus. Another allows for reading choice by using district-approved basals or anthologies and allowing students to skim the book and select the pieces they wish to read.

If there was simply one recipe for applying the reading/writing workshop approach, then perhaps that approach would no longer be a workshop approach. Flexibility would be forfeited for prescription. For Atwell, Rief, Romano and the others, the hallmark of the reading/writing workshop approach is its flexibility—its accommodation to the unique creativity of every student and of every teacher across a landscape of unique and distinct classroom communities.

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Liz Stephens, a doctoral candidate at the University of Houston, is creating a laser disc and software about reading/writing workshop for use in teacher education classes.